

Serial number 0364

Title An analysis of migrating identities in students returning to postgraduate studies

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An analysis of migrating identities in students returning to postgraduate studies

Abstract:

There is little understanding about what is involved in picking up or transferring to academic practices (from everyday or professional ones) by mature students. I recently completed research focusing on the complexity of learning academic practices, particularly writing academic texts, for a group of mature students returning to studies. Using dialogical journals written by them, I analysed the emerging authorial identity and agency in their writing and their learning. I use the concept of 'migrating identities' to theorise what is at stake when so-called, 'mature' or 'non-traditional' students seek to participate in higher education discourse and literacy practices. I focus in particular on core concepts of voice and agency. This presentation briefly describes the research, and offers some examples and analysis of such students' experiences in terms of their developing authorial identities, voice, and agency, through their often challenging learning experiences and expectations of them in the university environment.

Outline:

This presentation relates research into the direct experience of a generally understudied population and points to shifts of identity apparent in their writing as key to understanding underprepared or non-traditional students. When so-called 'mature' or 'non-traditional' students enter a higher educational institution, there is often, for them, a gap between what the institution holds and what they bring. An example of this is the issue of writing; in the educational experiences of these students, writing was for assessment only and not a communication between writer as author and reader as co-respondent. Their writing after school has generally consisted of informal notes, reports or filling in forms. So, in coming to the academic institution, they have had little experience in academic writing.

Rather than widening participation serving to create a misfit between the institution's system and the new types of students (and learning) it accepts, Thompson argues for the need to create new spaces and practices, to re-theorise the discourse and to 'operate dialectically and strategically within and against the systems in which we work' (2000:6). In other words, in considering

the specific needs of the students now accepted into our institutions, there is a need to look at the institutional system (of the growing diverse student population) and design something new and more appropriate. Historically, the 'Academic Development' movement in South Africa evolved from what was known in the 80's as 'Academic Support' with the recognition in the late 80's, that rather than the issue of students being 'underprepared' for higher education, in fact, 'universities were underprepared for the task of embracing the diversity that would characterise student populations following a shift to democracy' (Boughey & Niven, 2012:40). Boughey & Niven explain that this evolution also involved a commitment to research which attempts to understand students' experiences in higher education, using critical social theories. They relate concerns about 'epistemological access'; the provision of 'access to the academic ways of knowing that sustain the universities – rather than the merely formal access needed to register as a student' (Boughey & Niven, 2012:40).

In order to increase the possibility of catering for educational experiences that are of value to formerly 'non-traditional' students, research into their higher educational experiences is imperative. This research needs to include analyses of the transitions they undergo, of their 'interpretive frameworks' and engagements within the new knowledge communities they enter, including the development of agency in their writing, and the migrations of identities that are involved in these processes. Boughey (2010) points out that for South African students, the transition to university often requires a change in the understanding of learning – from a 'reproductive' conception of learning – where knowledge is seen as a commodity, so the learner must repeat back what they have read or been told by their teacher – to a 'constructive' conception of learning, where, as a result of what is read or taught, existing knowledge is transformed into new knowledge; new knowledge is assimilated with existing knowledge and thus transformed.

The insights and analysis from this research offer important implications for the ways in which academics in mainstream programmes and staff working in various types of support units in universities work with these students.

This research was based in a course I taught, centered on developing academic literacy skills of reading, writing and critical thinking for a group of students returning to higher education after some time in the working world. Most of these students had established social and professional identities, but not academic identities.

Within the course there was an exercise in dialogical journaling amongst the students to promote writing as a social practice. The journals were intended

and used as a pedagogic method in an endeavour to provide students with an access route into the academy, incorporating their experiences, and attempting to promote the development of reflective and critical thinking, and of self-awareness as academic writers. The 'dialogical' nature of the journal writing refers to the active engagement between the writers and the readers in the journal partnerships. While this was initiated as a pedagogical tool, due to the evident richness of the journal entries, permissions were later obtained from the students to use their dialogical journals as data for research.

In analyzing the journals, I was particularly interested in how 'voice' is transformed through emerging reflective functioning and agency in the development of an authorial identity in the academic institution. In other words, I was interested in what transformations occur through the development of new ways of constructing meaning in academic thought and writing, and how these relate to migrations of identity in mature students coming to study at an institution of Higher Education.

By 'voice in writing', I am referring to a sense of the writer's position in what they are relating, which yields a sense of their identity as a writer to the reader. This 'voice' is closely related to the degree of agency the writer takes on in their writing. By 'agency in writing', I am referring to the writer's control and ownership of what they are saying and how they are saying it and this includes a sense of the student writers' own voice. The taking on of agency in writing and in learning requires higher levels of reflective functioning or cognitive action. In this context, what they as writers are showing or telling of themselves – to themselves and to others, constitutes their identity as writers. Furthermore, identity is constituted through use of discourse; as it is discursive, I looked at the acquisition by these students, in the process of their writing, of a 'discursive identity'.

My methodology involved a combination of grounded theory – through the identification of common themes in students' writing with an analysis of their reflective action and transforming identities as revealed in their narratives about learning. This analysis consisted of both Discourse analysis and Narrative analysis of the students' narratives. Essentially, narrative analysis was intended to study the stories or vignettes that students related and to consider how the stories they told themselves may have affected their learning experiences.

The data and analysis yielded a lot of stories of the gap between students' lived experience and the institution's dominant orientation to them. In my presentation, I offer examples of these for discussion.

References

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